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Interview of Ross Nedervelt

Ross Nedervelt 00:00

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Samuel Hurwitz 00:19

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths that they took to become a student of the past and projects they're working on at the MHS. I'm Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer and Editor in the research department at the MHS. Today, we are sitting down with Dr. Ross Nedervelt, an adjunct professor at Florida International University and a recipient of the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium and the short term and of the long term MHS National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship. Can you just give us a brief background of who you are, where you teach, what you focus on, and any other important information you think listeners should know about you.

Ross Nedervelt 01:10

So, I'm, as you mentioned, an adjunct professor of history at Florida International University where I got my PhD from back in 2019. I focus on colonial and revolutionary British North America, as well as the colonial Caribbean and Caribbean in a comparative perspective. So, focusing more on sort of politics and society through the lens of revolutions and resistance in the long 18th century.

Samuel Hurwitz 01:47

So why did you become a historian? Were there certain books, authors or teachers, or are there individuals that helped really cultivate your interest in the past?

Ross Nedervelt 01:56

I grew up in southwest Michigan, and a lot of our history is really framed by our relation to the Great Lakes and the maritime history and culture that comes from that. So, when I was about 9, 10 years old, I remember sitting in my fourth-grade class, and it was one of those bad weather days where the teachers just sort of keep you inside during the lunch hour recess and they give you a video to watch. Well, this

one time, they gave us a short documentary video on the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, sort of classic, sort of the last great major shipwreck in the Great Lakes history. November 11, 1975 that period of time, it was coming up on sort of the 40th anniversary of the sinking. I remember watching this. It was absolutely fascinating to me, just not first learning on, for the first time that not only were there major boats that sailed on the Great Lakes, but there were actually major shipwrecks out there, and that there were people going out and sort of diving on them, investigating them, and sort of learning about the history of what happened to the people who were on these ships, and what happened at a critical juncture, sort of a life and death moment, both in the in these people's lives and the wider community that they were related and connected to. And that really got me fascinated about learning more about maritime history and Great Lakes history and that sort of that lasted for a couple years, and I sort of began investigating different aspects of history. And when I got into about high school, I had moved on to reading early American historian authors, mainly their works that were aimed more towards public audiences. So, like Joseph E. Ellis and his works on George Washington*, His Excellency* was a major work that sort of captivated my interest on the founding era, and that sort of took me forward into university where I went to West Virginia University and studied under Tyler Boulware. He's sort of a frontier Cherokee colonial, southeast back country historian, and he really fostered a lot of my, you know, continued interest in border spaces and the history of early America in the mid to late 18th century.

Samuel Hurwitz 04:48
Can you talk about some of the most challenging issues you faced as a historian?

Ross Nedervelt 04:52
As a Caribbean historian, some of the major hurdles are really engaging with the archives and archival material in the Caribbean itself. A lot of that has been export, particularly for the colonial pre-20th century, pre-mid-19th century eras are collected and preserved back in the major metropole sites, London, Paris, Seville for the Spanish Empire, parts of the Netherlands, although I'm less familiar with that aspect of the history. There are specific elements of the Caribbean archival collection, let's say that are held in Caribbean archives. And one of the major hurdles with dealing with those is the fact that they're not well funded and not very well maintained, and it varies from island to island on how well you can access those. For example, I deal mainly with Bermuda and the Bahamas, and they have some

of the better archival collections that can be readily accessed by the public. There are active outreach programs that these archival divisions are trying to engage with and accomplish, but natural disasters most recently, for example, there was the fire at the Barbados National Archives, which destroyed its, a lot of its collection. You know, that's gone now, if they manage to save anything. A lot of really, what's left now is what's been preserved overseas, and that's really challenging, but it's not an unknown experience or an uncommon experience. Prior to that, I think it was Grenada or St. Vincent, their archives were their archival building was badly damaged by a hurricane in the early 2000s, and it never really recovered. So, accessing and trying to read, analyze, take notes on take photographs of gain public being able to acquire reproduction copies of maps or images from these Caribbean archives is it can be very challenging, and it's not it's not entirely in their control.

Samuel Hurwitz 07:44
So, for our listeners who might not be familiar with the Caribbean, how would you describe what the Caribbean is? How do you understand what the Caribbean is?

Ross Nedervelt 07:56
You know, it's a it's a multifaceted place with dozens of different cultures, different languages. A lot of it's united by the experience of slavery and sort of racial, imperial, sort of the colonial, post-colonial experiences that transcends most of the Caribbean, but it's also one that doesn't really fit, like traditional stereotypes. It's not all like tropical paradise, sandy beaches. There's still, you know, of course, there is that, and that's how a lot of lot of the public, at least in North America and Northern Europe, engages with the Caribbean. But it's real important to get, get away from that and actually experience the local culture, the local geography, places like the sort of the arid landscape and cacti of central Curaçao is a lot different than just, you know, a couple miles north where it's, you know, tropical forest and sandy beach, but it's still got this, you know, Dutch colonial architecture that you'd expect to see in, you know, Amsterdam or Rotterdam, that that typifies Willemstad. It's this breadth of geographies and cultural experiences that's so unique to both each individual island but various parts of its society.

Samuel Hurwitz 09:41
So, can you talk about the project you're working on here at the MHS, and how did this idea develop and what drew you to it?

Ross Nedervelt 09:51

So, my project looks at how Bermuda and the Bahamas took on a strategic significance and strategic importance to the United States during the Age of the American Revolution. What first brought me to this was looking at newspaper reports from it was detailing published in colonial American newspapers in about 1775/1776 that discussed how the Continental Congress had placed an embargo on the entirety of the British Empire as a response to like the continued escalation out of the Coercive Acts and British Metropoles efforts to increasingly suppress the sort of the revolutionaries' spirit expanding out of New England to all the 13 colonies, so they embargo all of the British Empire, except for Bermuda and the Bahamas. And I want to know why that was. And as I began to dig into that more pursue that question, why were these two island colonies exempted from this wider embargo, this barring of trade, I came to find out that there was actually pretty strong sympathy from Bermudians and Bahamians for the American Revolution to the point that they were actually actively supplying arms and munitions to the American patriots the Continental Army in 1775 and early 1776. So, I started to think more about what would the American Revolution, the breakaway colonies look like if Bermuda and the Bahamas came along with it, and looking through the papers of figures like Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane, they were very much thinking about that too. Silas Deane in particular, saw Bermuda as having a very strategic role to the independence of the United States. It was to him, it was vital that Britain be forced as far away from the North American mainland as possible, and having Bermuda or the Bahamas as part of the Revolution, it forced it off of the mainland and onto out into these sort of nebulous maritime border spaces that could be combated away from the population centers on the mainland, not effectively obviously. Britain's Royal Navy far exceeded the strength and firepower that anything the Continentals were producing at this time. It would have been a massive sort of pit of money and men that would have to go into fortifying someplace like Bermuda or the Bahamas against the Royal Navy, and it would just it was not practical for that to happen. And as my sort of pursuit of those questions and those lines of thinking developed over the course of an initial project, my master's thesis at the University of New Hampshire, and then the early versions of my early drafts of my dissertation, I started to think more and more about the long-term significance. What did it mean for the United States, for Bermuda and the Bahamas and sort of this western Atlantic border sea, to not become part of the United States, to remain part of the British Empire? What did that mean for the United States's security, its sovereignty and the individual status of American citizens out in the Atlantic in the years after the American Revolution?

What I found was as Britain fortified Bermuda in the Bahamas in the 1790s out into the 1830s and '40s, it really hardened these spaces against trying to create a more defined border in a space that lacks definition. You can't really have a border, you know, an actual line of demarcation out in a maritime space. It's very much an invented line that has no real meaning. It's very nebulous. But they tried to create this sort of, these hardened spots from which to sort of project power and constrain the United States. And in the 1790s and early 1800s this took the form of impressment and privateering activities against American merchant ships and then American frigates. It's sort of these, these engagements that occur in the lead up to what would become the War of 1812 and then when the War of 1812 actually kicked off, Britain consolidated power at Bermuda, naval forces at Bermuda, and then on George Cockburn and Alexander Cochrane to move into the Chesapeake, blockade it, and then launch the what's what becomes the burning of Washington, D.C. and the siege of Baltimore. All of that planning and build up takes place at the emerging naval station at Bermuda. What people like Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane saw as something that would be colonial islands sympathetic to them and their cause in 1776 some places that would have strategic importance back then, what the limitations of American power during the American Revolution forces them to remain unrealized. The United States fails to pull them into the United States as states and Britain realizes that in 1776 and you know, over the course of 40 or so years, builds up power at these sites, fortifies them, turns them into defensive points, and then turns them against the United States during the War of 1812, and a bit after that in Spanish Florida, out of the Bahamas, there's, there's a subversive arms running campaign that comes out the Bahamas in the years after the War of 1812. So, it's very much the strategic thing that gets turned against the United States.

Samuel Hurwitz 17:17
So, can you tell us about some of the sources you're using here at the MHS?

Ross Nedervelt 17:21
Here at the MHS I'm using a lot of it's a combination of newspaper sources, American pamphlets and documents from the early American Shaw-Shoemaker collection, which speaking of limitations to archives and archival usage my institution no longer subscribes to the online database, or at least at this time, no longer does. So, it's really helpful to be here at the MHS and actually access the collection on microfiche. But I'm also using a lot of the John Adams and John Quincy Adams papers, specifically

John Quincy Adams papers as Secretary of State, as an overseas diplomat, particularly in the lead up to the Treaty of Ghent during the War of 1812. I'm looking for a lot of his thoughts on Bermuda, the Bahamas. You know that western Atlantic maritime space, particularly for American sailors, American fishermen, as well as relations related to what Spanish Florida or formerly British East Florida. But I'm trying to use a lot of the collections here is to try to answer the questions surrounding, how did Bermudians and Bahamians perceive the American patriots, how they place themselves within a divided British Atlantic, and how did American patriots view first view Bermudians and Bahamians early in the Revolution as were these possible allies, were they essentially the collective one of us against Britain, and then later on, how did they view them after the break, you know, after the Treaty of Paris of 1783, when Bermuda and the Bahamas remained within the British Empire. That's a lot of what I'm trying to use the collections here to answer those particular questions. It's tricky to do. A lot of that hinges on merchant family papers, logbooks from mariners, letter books from mariners, in the case of sort of the political and diplomatic aspect using the Adams papers to try to flesh out how they viewed Bermuda and the Bahamas and understood their place within either the British Empire or possibly the United States.

Samuel Hurwitz 20:16
Have there been any unexpected finds in these sources that may have challenged or underwritten certain thoughts that you had going into this?

Ross Nedervelt 20:26
Not necessarily so much challenged at this point in time, mainly because a lot of that I tended to go into these sort of with, with a blank canvas approach. I let what was there sort of jump out at me. I didn't really go in with a whole lot of preconceived notions, but a lot of that work was done in the images that came out of that, in in my thinking about this project, really came out of the time that I was here at the MHS during my short term fellowship, as well as the NERFC so it's coming into the NEH fellowship a lot of I know what to expect. Everything's kind of set in stone, although the thing that probably surprised me the most, this is way back in 2016/2017 was finding of the captain Joel spy map of St. George's Bermuda. It's by far my favorite collection piece at the MHS, because it actually marked out in sort of a rudimentary plan of you know, the houses and towns of St. George's Bermuda, each individual house, each individual family that was believed to be sympathetic to the American cause. And there are so many prominent names on the on a list of names on the back of one of those maps that

jump out at me. It's really fascinating to actually see that and then pair those up with those names with documents in Bermuda's colonial office papers, or the Tucker Coleman papers from William and Mary [University] to actually get an idea of who those people were, why they were on that list, and why they may have said one thing to the British but then be acting in a completely different way towards the American patriots or their American business partners.

Samuel Hurwitz 22:43
How do you think your research will help audiences better understand the past?

Ross Nedervelt 22:47
Well, I hope that my research will help them understand that it wasn't just the 13 colonies against Britain. It wasn't just that, you know, the mainland, or, you know, the 13 colonies or Canada or the Floridas. It was there were actually places off of North America, the North American mainland that were one sympathetic to Bermuda or to the rebellious United States that the Revolutionary generation saw as possible, quote, unquote, 14th states to the United States, allies or brethren in in the Revolutionary cause. But I also hope that they come to understand that there's also a very strategic purpose for the American patriot's pursuit of these colonies, and the consequences of that failure sort of come out, particularly from Bermuda and the Bahamas, and in a way that sort of bites back that you'll inflict damage on the United States. There's, there's a it's not like a lingering question or lingering desire, like the United States, wanting Canada to become a part of the United States. It's there's but there's not a whole lot of immediate problems that that come out of that conflict where with Bermuda in the Bahamas, that failure, there's just a progression of skirmishes, impressment, privateering, that, and then invasions and subterfuge that occur over the course of decades before it's finally resolved between Britain and the United States.

Samuel Hurwitz 25:24
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